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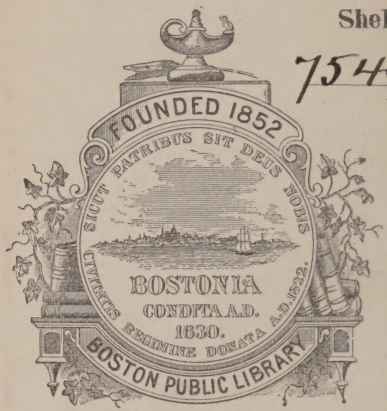

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THE SPIRIT OF REFORM.

A

DISCOURSE

PREACHED ON FAST DAY,

April 8, 1852,

AT THE

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FEDERAL STREET MEETING-HOUSE.

BY REV. EZRA S. GANNETT.

BOSTON:
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THE SPIRIT OF REFORM.

ISAIAH, LXII, 1. For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness.

The Proclamation in obedience to which we are assembled, invites us "to examine and consider the errors of individual and associated life * * * and the nature of our duty to the vicious, the ignorant, the unfortunate, among us." It also exhorts us to "invoke the Divine blessing upon our institutions of reformation, humanity, education, religion." We shall not, therefore, be unmindful of the purpose for which this day is set apart, if we devote our time to an inquiry into the nature and action of that Spirit of Reform, which is needed to correct "the errors of associated life," and to make our public institutions in the highest degree efficient for good. It is a subject which deserves our attention. It is a subject which should be approached without prejudice, and discussed with calmness. Unhappily, it has been so connected with personal relations and political questions, that dispassionate remarks are seldom heard, and perhaps are not often welcome; while he from whom they come is in danger of being regarded, on the one side and the other, as timid, politic, dishonest. Yet there must be a view of the subject which it presents in disconnection from any party interests or temporary excitement, and this view should be studied by one who would bring a wise or fair mind to the examination of its more practical aspects. It is by considering the spirit of reform in its essential char-

acteristics, that we shall best prepare ourselves for a decision in regard to measures which may be proposed or ends that may be pursued in its name.

This is my subject—the Spirit of Reform. I would describe it, and criticise it, independently of its local applications.

We must first, however, settle one point,—that there is need of reform,—that the spirit of which I shall speak has a work to do which ought to be done. I am not sure that a secret incredulity on this point is not the ground of that want of interest which many persons manifest in the philanthropic enterprises of the day. The world is well enough as it is, or it is growing better fast enough, is the thought which governs their minds, though it may not cross their lips. Indeed a man would be rather ashamed to say aloud that society appears to him to need no improvement. But most of us, probably, entertain a less lively sense than facts would warrant of the evils which press upon the world. If the statistics of suffering or vice in any of its forms be laid before us, we are too apt to dismiss them with the remark, that they are delusive, if not wholly false. Let statistics alone, then; when most accurate, they are only *indications* of a terrible truth. No calculation of the amount of money wasted, crime committed, or life lost by any one social indulgence can expose the enormity of the evil. No catalogue of half-starved men or half-clad women can reveal the misery that ensues from an unjust remuneration of labor. The *visible* suffering can never be told, it can only be intimated; while behind this lie a wretchedness and a sinfulness that neither figures nor words can exhibit. Put aside statistics, and take the masses of fact which lie upon the world's history, like deposits of lava on the green fields around Vesuvius; and what do they show, if not that there is need of reforms that shall

reach the very heart of society? Look, in this middle of the nineteenth century of the Christian era, not at Heathen countries, but at Christian Europe or Protestant America; at France, the beautiful, sinking into political ruin beneath the despotism of a name; at England, the free, with its millions of work-people, in mines and manufactories and on the soil, who have no more hope of rising above the lowest condition of civilized life than if they lived in Tartary; at the United States, the pride of the earth, with the continual sentences of our courts upon criminals of every class in one half of the Union, and with slavery as a permanent institution in the other half; at Boston, the city of our love, with its provocations to intemperance at every corner of the streets, its well-known allurements to licentiousness, its crowded abodes of indigence and guilt; look where you will,—alas! look into our homes and our churches, and if you can say that there is no need of reform, why, then you are one of those whom the prophet of old, and the Saviour afterwards, described as "having ears, but they hear not, and eyes, but they see not." In this land, and this city, we are very far from expounding or apprehending the true theory of civilization. There are evils enough on this continent to sink it into utter perdition, if Providence were not disciplinary and God were not merciful.

One other truth must be admitted before we can hope for any satisfactory change. The improvement which is needed must come through human agency. We must neither leave it for God to effect by a miraculous interference with the affairs of men, nor expect that the world will advance to perfection by certain inherent laws of self-development; for God's special aid in behalf of our race has been given through Christ, and the great law of social progress deducible from the Gospel is, that man must be faithful to the

opportunities of usefulness which invite his effort. The tendencies of society offer a reciprocal antagonism, and those which lead to deterioration are certainly as strong as those which are suited to raise and refine a people. Whatever conquest shall be gained over error and sin, whatever permanent removal of an evil that now enters into the history of the times shall be secured, we, or our children, will owe to the exertions of men,—call them philanthropists, reformers, or what we may,—visionaries, radicals, fanatics, (names may hinder or help, but they cannot defeat a good cause, for though there be potency in a name, necessity and will are still mightier); the changes that shall introduce a better condition of humanity must come from the endeavor and consent of men whose eyes are open and whose hearts are true. They who "for Zion's sake will not hold their peace, and for Jerusalem's sake will not rest," shall cause "the righteousness thereof to go forth as brightness."

One further remark would I make in anticipation of the inquiry before us. Those reforms which shall be productive of the widest and most lasting good must spring from religious faith. We need not deny the value of many changes in the social condition, which are the result of physical or economical science. Fulton and Arkwright have been benefactors of the world. And yet their inventions may eventually aggravate the moral perplexities of life. The greatest mistake of this age consists in allowing philanthropy and Christianity to stand in an attitude of mutual defiance or distrust. Who was the great philanthropist? Was it not he who "died, the just for the unjust?" Who was the great reformer? Was it not he whose influence creates all things anew? Can they who have learned of him be the enemies of beneficent change? The streams that shall carry refreshment to our wearied humanity must

flow from the life of him who came "to seek and to save that which was lost." There is a fine symbolic passage in one of the Hebrew prophets, which describes the efficacy of influences proceeding from a devout faith. "By the river upon the banks thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to its months, *because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary;* and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine." Because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary,—those few words lay open the whole secret of success in the conduct of undertakings for the amelioration of society.

If now we examine the spirit of reform, that we may ascertain what qualities determine its essential character, we shall first discover that it is a courageous and aggressive spirit. Such it must be from the nature of its office. Its aim is to overthrow that which exists, and to substitute for the admitted or the cherished among men that which it regards as better. Its attitude, therefore, may always seem to be one of hostility, of assault. Its attack on popular errors, as we shall presently observe, will not be indiscriminate, nor simply fierce; but by the conditions of its birthright it is bound to be the inexorable foe of what it deems wrong. When it succumbs to a social abuse, it forfeits its claim to be considered a leader in the affairs of men; it abdicates its authority, and betrays the cause which it has undertaken to defend. To persons of a timid or quiet temper this element in the spirit of reform is disagreeable. They are afraid of it. But they are not the persons to carry forward the world. They are serviceable and pleasant in their place, but their place is not among the champions of freedom or truth. A frank and manly bearing be-

comes the reformer, such as bespeaks his confidence in a good, though it be a perilous or difficult enterprise. If he quails before obstacles, is intimidated by threats or worried by ridicule, he shows himself unfit for the office he has assumed. The spirit of reform is not an Ishmael, whose hand is "against every man, and every man's hand against him," but it is a Peter the Hermit, preaching in all ages a crusade for the recovery of the Holy Land from the infidels.

Hence, secondly, it is an indefatigable, earnest, energetic spirit. If it were not, how could it accomplish any thing? Changes in the opinions and practices of mankind are not wrought by feeble hands. Customs which generations have accepted do not stand like rocks poised as if waiting for a child's touch to roll them from the mountain-height. They are imbedded in the ground, which has risen up about them, and grown old with them, and which must be rent apart before they can be dislodged. To many, if not to most observers, the reformer may seem fearfully in earnest. His soul, possessed by the great ideas, to whose service he has bound himself by indentures of conscience and heart, is intensely active, and this inward force cannot but communicate itself to his external life. And yet why should we select him as an example of unusual energy? Is he more in earnest than are bad men to secure their ends? Is he more in earnest, than is the politician of a large or a small type, or the scholar whose thirst for knowledge, inflamed by ambition, induces him to undervalue health and life, or the merchant whose devotion to business secures to him universal confidence on 'Change, or a multitude of others in this eager and toilworn age? If the philanthropist were a sluggard, other men would trample on him as they pressed forward in the great caravan of life. If he had not an indomitable perseverance, he would be thrown back by other

resolute laborers after success, jostling him on every side. He must be firm and strong, if he would hold his ground; how much more, if he would reach his end.

With strength of conviction and steadfastness of endeavor is, however, joined, in the third place, practical wisdom. The spirit of reform is a discriminating spirit. This attribute it discovers in regard both to the end and to the means. It does not meditate universal destruction. We are considering, you will remember, that which is worthy to bear the name, not the reckless and arrogant spirit that often claims its honors. The true reformer is not he who dooms every thing that is old to obloquy or overthrow. Nero setting fire to Rome, or the barbarian conqueror who, perhaps falsely, is said to have consigned the Alexandrian Library to the flames, as well deserves the name. He who can see nothing good in the past is not fit to build up the future. There is always a claim to respectful consideration in the old from the single fact of its age; for that which has been adopted or countenanced by successive generations may be presumed to contain something that is true and valuable. It may appear upon a rigid investigation that this presumption is sustained by little intrinsic merit, but the simple quality of age, instead of being a ground of distrust, is a proper reason for deferential observance. It is easy to talk of hoary abuses and time-honored prejudices, but customs may be venerable as well as men, and I should expect of one who would bestow contempt on a usage because it was old that he would treat his grandparents with disrespect. A similar principle of judgment will hold good in regard to current opinions. The fact of their general reception is in their favor. It does not prove them to be right, but it should dispose us to find some soundness in them; for the common sense of mankind may

be taken as a security against the prevalence of an utterly wrong conclusion. Atheism has never been professed by a whole community, and the acquiescence of a people for long ages in political bondage has involved an apprehension of the importance of order and government. Conservatism may become obstinate, it may make itself ridiculous,—in either case running to excess; but conservatism within due limits is approved by right reason. The spirit of reform, if faithful to its office, will be candid and judicious. It sees much to admire, as well as much to condemn, in the past; and in the present that which it may accept, as well as that which it must alter. He is but one stage above insanity, or has sunk below this into imbecility, who needs to be reminded that innovation is not always improvement.

It is not only a proper respect for that which is commendable in the past or the present, that distinguishes the spirit of reform. It also recognizes the difficulties and objections that lie in the way of needed change, and it is therefore, fourthly, a patient spirit. Desirous to compass its ends as soon as they can be effectually secured, it is neither blind to the obstacles it must encounter, nor regardless of the fact, which history and experience so distinctly announce, that a precipitate establishment of new arrangements is not the best guarantee for their continuance. Violence is not the surest way to real success. It may demolish an institution or shatter an empire, but it will seldom raise a permanent structure upon their ruins. To remove an evil without filling its place with something better is too much like the expulsion of the unclean spirit in our Lord's parable, which after a time, finding its former habitation vacant, resumed its control with increased malignity. Behold the illustration of this truth which is brought before us in sadder characters by every arrival of intelligence from the Europeau

continent. Now a thoughtful reform gives heed to such lessons, and does not prosecute its purpose in defiance of that law of progress which forbids abrupt transitions from one state of society to another. It listens to the teachings of Providence, it copies the example of Providence; and while it never compromises its principles, it examines relations and estimates probabilities, and, that it may make man what he should be, remembers what he is—a creature of habit, environed by circumstances, the growth of time, which can be succeeded only by another growth that will also require time to give it the necessary hold on the soil of life. Hence this spirit is somewhat cautious, and may even be slow in its movements. It distinguishes also between evils which poison the heart of a people, and those which merely affect their external condition, between wrong principles and disagreeable accidents, between vices and whims. If he do not make this distinction, the reformer is sure to become the slave of his own whims, offending good taste or outraging public sentiment, that he may set an example of independence, as he maintains; forgetting that his foolish singularity jeopards the interests which he has taken in charge.

Yet this is a hopeful spirit of which we are discoursing. It does not yield to discouragement, whatever hindrances may oppose its wishes; nor, because a long interval of delay shall separate the proposal from the accomplishment of an obvious good, does it exchange the tone of instruction for the language of invective. Understanding the conditions to which human progress is subject, it retains its confidence in the work to which it has devoted itself; and believing in the Eternal Care that is over the world, it admits no doubt that, if they who love their fellow-men will continue their labors, in God's time the fruit shall blossom and ripen. What if it do not gladden their

eyes? What if they obtain little visible promise of success? Such convictions as theirs depend not for support on immediate effects. They do their part in the work which needs to be done, and let others that shall follow "enter into their labors." Hence they are persons of an equal and cheerful temper. The true reformers, I mean; who are of a very different stamp of character from those whom the least opposition fills with wrath, and whose vocabulary shows a studied disregard of the Apostle's counsel, to "speak the truth in love." The man who affects philanthropy for the gratification of self-will places himself on a level with the demagogue who applauds free institutions for the sake of an office; if it were ever right to despise a fellow-being, both candidates for an equal share of contempt.

I cannot refrain from repeating, in this connexion, that I may give it the prominence which it deserves, that the spirit of reform is, sixthly, a spirit of reverence and humility. It fears God in its work of righteousness. The scornful, self-sufficient temper which betrays a mind never brought under the discipline of divine truth, or, if once subject, voluntarily seduced from its allegiance, has no part nor lot in the history of the true reformer. He is one who reverences sacred things too much to covet the distinction of an iconoclast. He is not one who, because religious institutions may be perverted by worldliness or profaned by hypocrisy, renounces and denounces them. Least of all, is he one who reviles the name of Christ, or predicts a time when the effete energies of Christianity shall retire before an era of universal improvement, and an all-embracing philosophy shall take the place of that Gospel which God has given through his Anointed Son. The reform which not only stands outside the Christian Church, but delights to fling against it the feeble missiles of its hate, is neither to be honored nor to be dreaded.

As now we have noticed the principal features in that spirit of reform, which we should all invite into our hearts, I may add, by way of conclusion, one or two remarks of a more general nature, which in their application to life will easily shape themselves into rules of conduct.

First, let us believe in progress. This belief we may cherish in regard alike to the future and to the present. It is impossible, unless Christian men and women betray an apathy beyond what they have ever shown, that improvement should not mark the course of future ages. Hope is a delusion, faith is an infirmity, prophecy is a falsehood, if mankind are never to advance beyond the point or the form of civilization at which they are now resting:—no, not resting, as we shall presently see. There is a "good time coming;" it is now at the door. Open wide that door, and let it enter and take possession of the era. Christianity is not worn out nor defeated. Mankind are not to revolve in a perpetual ellipse, sometimes farther from social perfection than now, but never nearer. Do not believe it, for the reason and the heart remonstrate against such a mournful persuasion. Do not deride the promise of a better age; but rather, by your consent to the hope which kindles so many noble souls, which has prompted so many sacrifices and sustained so many martyrs in the cause of freedom, of human well-being, of the world's redemption—the hope which no temporary disaster can extinguish and no dark cloud resting on the next hour can embarrass, by your indulgence of that hope encourage others to "stand fast" in the ministry of love which Providence has assigned to them. "For Zion's sake hold not your peace, and for Jerusalem's sake rest not, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness;" for, as surely as there is a throne of Infinite Majesty, as surely as there was a cross planted on Calvary, and the one

is the instrument and the other is the guardian of the recovery of our race from barbarism, oppression, vice and suffering, so surely shall righteousness go forth to illuminate and bless all people. Ages may intervene before that day shall arrive. And yet believe in the present progress of the world towards its final deliverance from the burthens of error and sin with which it is now laden. There is improvement now, every year and every day; improvement here, improvement in the Old World. The nations learn wisdom through their mistakes as well as through their successes. Kings and usurpers die; principles and wants survive. Those wants when understood, those principles when learned, whether through a joyful or a sad experience, will be stronger than usurpation or tyranny, stronger than prescription or habit. I do not believe the world is at this moment receding from the ground which it had gained in the last half century. No; facts on every side contradict such a notion. Humanity is not sinking back into the darkness of superstition or the bondage of corruption. No; nothing shows this. The snows of winter may for a night intrude themselves upon the domain of spring; but its reign is broken, a warmer sun than has yet shone will melt those snows, and they will only serve to swell the streams which shall bear up the world's activity on their generous currents.

Do not look with an unkind eye on the philanthropy of the day. It has its faults, its vices, its mischiefs; but, with them all, it has its excellent qualities and its beneficent functions. It has accomplished much, and it will produce yet more that shall attest its value. It has raised asylums for the insane, opened schools for the blind and the idiotic, snatched neglected children from fatal exposure, dispersed the seeds of knowledge among the people, diffused liberal ideas throughout

Christendom, taught men to look on slavery and war as they did not look a generation ago, and sent the Gospel to the ends of the earth. It has enriched literature and expanded effort. The best poetry, the best eloquence, the best history, the best fiction, I wish I could add, the best preaching, bear the impress of its influence. Despise it not, deride it not. Rebuke its extravagance, but honor and adopt the courageous, energetic, discriminating, patient, hopeful, and religious spirit with which it may be, and to a great extent is, at once animated and tempered.

Finally, bear it ever in mind that example is one of the great means of diffusing correct principles and awakening sympathetic action. If it be not so loud as the spoken word, it is more persuasive; if less argumentative than the printed page, it is more conclusive. Example at once enforces and illustrates truth. Nor need it be always an example of aggressive benevolence. There are periods in the world's history, and positions in the life of the individual, when a calm pursuit of one's own task is more instructive, and therefore more effectual, than vehement vindication of the right against the assumptions of arbitrary power or the inroads of vicious practice. A nation's duty may often lie, perhaps most often—why should I say perhaps? with but the rarest exceptions, a nation's duty always lies—in the peaceful and dignified exhibition of its internal vigor, rather than in expeditions or proclamations by which the rest of the world may be brought to stand by its side on the platform of political order which it has adopted. It will draw the rest of the world to its side much sooner by the steady development of its own energies on its own soil than by the fiercest resolves or the most warlike demonstrations. He is neither the wisest philanthropist nor the best patriot who would elevate his country into the position of armed champion for freedom

everywhere, or anywhere, on earth. What the Saviour said of his ardent disciple, is true in a much wider application, "They that take the sword shall perish with the sword." Unpopular as the doctrine may be, unheroic and un-American as it may sound, there is often a virtue, and therefore a moral power, in silence or inaction, that neither loud-mouthed menace nor busy cosmopolitanism can equal. And what is true of a nation, is also true of an individual. Silence may convey a rebuke that words cannot express. Quiet attendance on the duties of one's private situation may offer counsel that will be heeded, when more direct advice would be repelled as impertinent. Let every one, first of all, look into his own soul, and see how that stands before God in respect to the great questions of moral life. Let him then look over his outward conduct, and see how far that in its most familiar details is conformed to the principles of religious faith which he advocates. And then, as suitable occasion shall arise, will he be prepared to appear as the active and strenuous friend of every good cause, the supporter of every institution or reform which has the welfare of man, the elevation of society, the salvation of the world, as its end and reward. So shall we both promote our own spiritual well-being and contribute our part to the rescue of the community, and of the country, to which we belong from the evils under which they suffer; doing "our duty to the vicious, the ignorant, the unfortunate among us," and taking the surest method to render our invocation of "the Divine blessing upon our institutions of reformation, humanity, education, religion," acceptable to Him who heareth the prayer that is sustained by the concurrent spirit of the life.